11/25/62

GOD'S SEARCH FOR MAN

Our scripture lesson this morning told the story of a favorite New Testament character. Every child knows the song about Zacheius: A little man was he, and he climbed up in a tree; the Lord for to see and ~~xxx~~ so on. It's an appealing little story one that easily lends itself to our imagination. But a closer look at the details of Luke's account will show that the story is much more than pretty and appealing: that indeed it includes the major elements of the Christian faith.

The story takes place in Jericho, a magnificant ~~x~~city in the day of Jesus. It was called the city of palms: the air filled with the scent of Roses from the gardens of Herod Archelaus: the streets were crowded with merchants milling among booths of exotic goods. There were Pilgrams, stopping off on their way to Jerusalem and traders preparing to embark on caravans acrossx the desert. It was a Roman city, administered and taxed by those who had been appointed by Rome: and it was a Jewish city. It was the conquest of Jeriicho by Joshua centuries before that had given birth to one of the most popular Hebrew stories. The majority of the population were Jewish: and in Jericho, as in any other Metropolitan area where the evidence of Roman domiance was most obivious resent and hatred between ~~Jesus~~ Jews and ~~Rxxxx Rxxxxx~~ Romans ran high.

The first personality in the story is Zacheius. I have not called him the subject of the story because he is not: he is the object. The subject is the second personality- Jesus Christ. Zacheus, we are told, was the chief tax collector in Jericho and he was wealthy. It isn't always a good idea to add too much speculation to the Bibilical narration: but in this case we are justified to do a little. The name

Z. is very definitely a Hebrew name, meaning pure and righteous: and so we are safe in assuming that Z. was a Jew. Secondly he was the chief tax collector - this tells us even more. As you probably know, Rome was clever enough to hire local citizens to do the menial jobs of administering their provinces. It was a neat conservation of man power and Rome knew that the natural resent people show when forced to pay taxes to a conquering power would be quickly transferred to those local citizens who were employed by that power. Thusly, the job of tax collector was profitable but unpopular. Technically the name of the position was Publican, a word that appears quite frequently in the pages of the NT. The Jews associated Publicans with sinners of the worst sort: they are lumped together with thieves, murderers, adulterers and extortioners. A modern illustration to understand the utter contempt the Jews had for a publican would be the patriotic frenchmen's hatred of the Vichy regime; a regime under the leadership of Marshall Petain that chose to cooperate with the Nazis rather than resist after the fall of France. The Gaelic temper is easily aroused by no word, even today, does the job like Vichy or Petain.

Zaccheus was a publican; it was his job to collect taxes from all the Jews in Jericho. Rome, as an added assurance that the populance would hate the tax collectors, heaped irony upon insult by paying no real wages for this unpleasant task. Instead they allowed the publican to over-charge as much as possible; it was in this manner that he made his living. Luke tells us that ZAcheus was a tax collector; and as if to completely explain the man adds the two words "and rich." And so again we are safe in assuming that Zachaeus over charged for all he was worth and on the burdens of his countrymen became quite wealthy. Adding all this together we come to the perfectly

logical onclcusion that Zaccheus was the most hated, most despised man in all of Jericho. That he had friends is unlikely; if he did they were lmembers of the same wretched profession; that he lived in constant danger is sure.

It was this poor man that Luke reports as wanting to see Jesus. A good ~~xxx~~ question that is always asked is "Why was Zaccheus there.? Why would he want to see Jesus?" A quick answer is curiostiy. But I don't think Zaccheus, already the object of heaping scorn and ridicule, would risk more of the same by being associated with one who was so violently opposed by the Jewish hierarchy--just out of curiosity. He wanted to see Jesus, and he wanted to badly enough to climb a tree. There is more than curiosity here. ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ This was a man who was desparate. Hatred and scorn is not heaped on a man long until that man begins to show the effects. Zaccheus had rejected the tradition of his nation, he had cut himself off from all the heritage of the people of Israel; he had isolated himself from family, friends and countrymen; all in order to fatten his wallet. This was a man who inside, probably couldn't stand himself; this was a man who was continually conscious of hateful stares; this was a lonely man; a man who had trouble looking at himself in the mirror.

He could not have helped but know that Jesus had a reputation for associating with men like himself. His friends were the poor, the fisherman, he ate in the homes of sinners; he befriended a woman who had been a blatant prositute; as a matter of fact one of the twelve who were always with him had been a hated tax collector. Zaccheus wanted to see Jesus because here was hope. Here was a man who had helped men pick up the pieces of their lives and start anew. ZAaccheus was estranged from life--Jesus was a hope to get acquainted again.

Where Jesus passed the place where Zaccheus sat perched in a tree he looked up and said "Z. make haste and come down; for I must stay at your houe today." We can imagine the astonishment on Zaccheus's face. He had come looking fro Jesus, but Jesus had found him. Luke reports that the crowd was displeased that Jesus should associate withl such a man. He gives us only a brief report of the conversation but leaves us with the cnnclusion that Z. did start anew; that something important did happen in his empty life; that salvation did come into his house.

The reason I have spent so much time elaborating on this tiny segment of scripture is that I think it is one of the most profound, most applicable incidents in the whole Bible. It deserves more than our children's songs--for I see in it a perfect analogy to cultural, sociological and theological issues that are critical today. In Z. I can see a micro-cosm of humanity; in his search for Jesus the eternal quest of man for an ultimate; and in Jesus" discovery of Z. the uniquely new message of Christianity,

Cultural anthropologists tell us that man is a religious animal, among other things. Margaret Meade, in [redacted] studies of the oldest, purest civilizations existant today, has confirmed our suspicions that there has never been a culture, never even a tribe of people who did not have some awareness of a supreme being. Apparently man is born with a built in sensitivity to his own finitude--to the fact that he is not infinite; and conversely that there is an infinite and eternal. Every civilization known to us; from the most primitive aborigines to the sophisticated culture of Greece, has had its own way of expressing that sensitivity. Down through the centuries the search has continued. Men have tried to establish the existence of God mathematically. Thomas Acquinas, pushing Aristotelian logic much further than Aristotle would have dared; proved to himself and to

the scholastic philosophers that God exists; and from there went on to prove many other wonderful things; such as how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. Today this search continues. In great universities scholars still search for the ultimate in philosophy, in art and music. Men still say "I am looking for God." Even inside the Christian church men pursue God, trying to tie him down in a set of doctrines, a certain ritual or a way of life. Not very long ago I read the promotional mterial of a prominent church in this area and cameacross the slogan "Help us Help you find God," The search that Z. joined continues today; and as long as there is man; there will be an empty space inthe life of man that will be filled with something.

Z.'s natural quest for God, for meaning and depth to life was accentuated by the fact that he was exceptionally wretched. There can be no doubt that he had filled the space with money. Money was his ultimate, he had willingly sacrificed even his self respect to get it. Just as the fact that man is searching for God is true; so is it true that man will find something to fill the gap, even if it is not God.

Psychologists tell us that people are estranged from one another today; simply because people are willing to substitute something of their own liking for God in their lives. There is a space for an ultimate but we deceive ourselves into thinking that we can fill it. That the acquisition of material goods is the ultimate in many of our lives is news to no one. We try to give depth and meaning to our lives by reading, listening to good music, by keeping active, by living life every golden drop of it. "But," say those who study us, "we haven't

filled the gap: ~~the~~ we still find an emptyness and meaninglessness about existence, the solution to which alludes us. A great many of us still can't face ourselves, what we are, what we have done with our lives; strangely enough we are still in the wretched predicament of Z. And so, on goes the search, and the estrangement and the failure--

for when we set out to find God, to find meaning and direction in life we will fail.

Now this may seem like a strange statement to be coming from a pulpit; for many people come to church for precisely this reason--to find God--to find peace. To get inspiration. The church, in many cases, has allowed itself to become the agent of this self deception as illustratated in the little slogan I quoted.

But, returning to the scripture lesson, Z. did not find God. He was found by Jesus Christ. This is the very essence of the Christian gospel. Man in his hopeless sin, wallowing in vanity and pride, striving to find meaning to life simply cannot find God. God cannot be proven by human logic; God cannot be bottled up in theology or philosophy, true peace of heart is not something we can win if we try hard enough. Man can never successfully complete his search. And in our inability God finds us. This is what happened to Z. This is what we celebrate in a few short weeks. God has invaded the sphere of our life and confronted us face to face; found us in Jesus Christ, his only son. If we can do it alone, if we are able to find God there is no real reason to begin next Sunday as the period of expectation.

That God has taken the iniative and found man is what distinguishes Chrsitianity from all of the rest of the world's religions. Indeed if

puts Christianity above religion; for Jesus Christ was not just a leader of lmen, pioneering the brave search for God--he was God--a man going in a different direction from all the rest; a man whose very presence was the event of God finding and redeeming man.

The difference this truth makes to us and to the Church is tremendous. It means that we come to church--not to look and find but to be found. It means we pray--not so much in verbal request but in quiet listening. It can, in fact, change our entire lives; in giving up the search for God we will be discarding that which probably has probhibited him from finding us.

This was the experience of St. Augustine in the fourth cent. He had tried in every possible way to find himself, to see some meaning in life. He read classic philosophy till he could read no more. He completely emersed himself in theatrical arts. These having failed he lived a life of debachery and degeneracy with gusto. And when he had hit bottom; when he was so sure that life had no meaning, that if there was a God he was irrelevant--when he reached this point he gave up the search. Then it was that the answers came--and Augustine was found by God.

@When first I knew Thee,@ wrote Augustine, "Thou didst raise me up, that I might see there was somewhat for me to see, though as yet I was not fit to see it."

As you can easily see, it is easier for the Church to say that it has the answers; that herein is where you will find God. It is helpful to our collective ego to hear that if we look hard enough we willl find God. The church has found itself in difficulty on the past when it has had the courage to announce the opposite--that God finds man and that there is not much we can do alone. But this we must do for it is what happened in the event of Jesus Christ. One thing, however, we tend to overlook. Z. was found by Jesus Christ; his life was renewed when his

eyes met the yes of our Lord. / This would never had occured had he not climbed ~~cherished~~ that tree. Z. had made himself conspicuous and obvious--

~~he had sit so;~~

he had put himself where the love and grace of God would reach him. This we need to say also: The Church of Jesus Christ--is where this takes place. / We need to know that we cannot, by our own efforts find God; but we also need to know that God will not find us--in bed on Saundy morning. / There is something we can do--not to find God--but in putting ourselves where he can come to us. When our ears are sensitive, where our hearts and minds are voluntarily laid open; when he has ordained that his word should be heard.

ZA. was a funny little man--but in his story we see the very essence of Christianity. / Let us heed his story; let us give up our vain searching for meaning and allow our God to find us. / Jexus Christ brought salvation to the house of Z. / It is ours also--if we will but allow his search to be complete.